

Book Review *Dreads and Open Mouths:
Living/Teaching/Writing Queerly* by Aneil Rallin

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Aneil Rallin's *Dreads and Open Mouths: Living/Teaching/Writing Queerly* is a bracing work of scholarship and personal witness. Rallin's genre-blurring approach combines interventions in rhetoric and composition and queer and postcolonial theories with fragments of autobiography and critiques of state violence in the US and abroad. The text enacts and exposes the author's grief and pain, pleasures and desires, both formally and in terms of content. Taken as a whole, the project functions as a persuasive argument for the value of scholarly and personal writing that defies White, cis-heteropatriarchal, US-centric, corporatist and traditional academic standards, while bearing witness to the violence endured by queer people of color in the American academy and beyond. Yet though Rallin clearly conveys the personal and political hazards of overly rigid approaches to writing and writing instruction, they offer few concrete prescriptions for how the field of rhetoric and composition might better center queer, postcolonial, and anti-racist content and forms of expression while maintaining a commitment to the practical needs of first-year writers. This is a conscious choice on Rallin's part, but it limits the pedagogical purchase of their project, and the book's most sustained pedagogical argument—that "rhetorical risk-taking" ought to be a central feature of student writing and composition instruction (55)—is underdeveloped. Yet the queer power of the work is undeniable. *Dreads and Open Mouths* disrupts traditionalist assumptions about writing instruction and demands that rhetoric and composition do more to meet the needs of its queer and immigrant students and instructors, its students and instructors of color, and all of those whose bodies, pleasures, and literacies deviate from normative assumptions.

Like its argument, the form of Rallin's hybrid project is thoroughly anti-normative. Rallin's narration eschews traditional paragraphing and spacing in favor of fragmentary and often non-linear entries, "notes" (9) that are presented flush left and set off from each other with white space. The breaks between entries enact "ruptures that have been imposed by the law, the nation, global geopolitics, institutional structures, disciplines, genres, languages, authors, selves" (3). In so doing, these breaks represent the author's sense of dislocation and vulnerability as a queer immigrant of color in the United States. Each chapter begins with an epigraph—a quotation from a noted queer, postcolonial, or composition theorist. Similar quotations frame and punctuate each chapter's subsections, so that Rallin's memories and ruminations flow out of and into those of the many theorists who inspire them, in particular Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, Eve Sedgwick, and Ian Barnard. This approach effectively contests the normative assumption that "good" writing is autonomous, the product of a single subject.

Chapter one, "Immigrant Crossings," explores, among other important themes, how fluency in American standard English is used to police the borders of the English classroom and the neoliberal

university, whose rigid standards of exclusion mirror those of the United States. Chapter two, “Taming Queer,” juxtaposes the forced apology of an NBC News reporter during the US invasion of Iraq against a campaign of harassment an anonymous critic mounted against Rallin’s queer and postcolonial theory-informed writing program pedagogy. Rallin’s supervisors support them, but because they do so by insisting that Rallin’s courses focus on writing rather than on race, gender, and sexuality, Rallin argues that their defense of their methods perpetuates a dominant discourse that surveils and regulates queer people of color (31).

Chapter three, “Queer Is Not A Substitute for Gay/Lesbian,” situates queerness as anti-normativity within Rallin’s experience on the academic job market. In one bracing anecdote, they inform a job committee that their course on queer film and video is going “disastrously” and are met with alarm (36). Another note recounts Rallin’s participation on a CCCC panel entitled “How Queer Can Writing Administration Be?” in which the other panelists elide anti-normative queerness with (often quite normative) gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans experiences. Queer, for Rallin, is “oppositional, fragmentary, transgressive, multiply perverse” (44), and the form of the chapter, like that of the monograph, vividly enacts those anti-assimilationist, disruptive values. In chapter four, “Dreads and Open Mouths,” the narrative shifts perspectives, tracing an unnamed, third-person male narrator’s anguished relationship to writing in English to his sense of “diasporic displacement” (51), his implication in and fury about US state violence, and his frustration with the normalizing standards of traditionalist composition instruction, as exemplified by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition* (64).

Chapter five, “Desiring Queer Brown Boy,” offers a series of autobiographical sketches of a male narrator’s queer coming of age as a child in Bombay, and includes a wrenching allusion to his sexual abuse by a male teacher. Chapter 6, “Queer Unsettlings,” is an account of a second-person narrator’s dialogs with a boy—seemingly a stand-in for a part of Rallin, or perhaps Rallin’s unconscious—who quotes Sedgwick, expresses a desire for queer forms of linguistic and embodied expression, and shares in that desire with the chapter’s narrator (85). In chapter seven, “Dreads And Open Mouths II,” the narrator, variously employing the pronouns *he*, *she*, *they*, *you*, *I*, and *we*, returns to the theme of writing as a form of rupture that can mirror global catastrophes and state violence that too often go unacknowledged in the dominant discourses of North America. The chapter trenchantly exposes the ways the liberal academy’s transactional embrace of “multiculturalism” sustains the sociopolitical status quo (99), and argues that teachers of English must “open ourselves to our students’ manifold voices” (107) to better embrace students’ grammatical and syntactical differences, which reflect valuable linguistic fluencies and literacies.

In chapter eight, “Love Letters To Adrienne Rich,” the narrator continues to enact identarian and artistic fluidity by employing multiple pronouns, drawing on fragments of Rich’s poetry, and centering Rich’s insistence that “socially conscious citizens/thinkers/teachers/writers” must . . . monitor the centers of power, not . . . seek acceptance from them” (122). Chapter nine, “Can I Get A Witness?: Writing With June Jordan,” situates Rallin’s remembered attraction to a boy in Bombay who is ultimately murdered for being Muslim in relation to Jordan’s account of a neighbor boy who was beaten by the NYPD and another whose brother is murdered by the police. Rallin’s despair at the

ethnic violence that seems to be intensifying in India joins with their anguish at the violence being perpetuated against Palestinians by the Israeli state and against African-Americans and other people of color in the United States.

Chapter ten, “Rejecting Quietism /Acting Up,” details the objections of a narrator known as X to the 2013 decision on the part of the Conference on College Composition and Communication to hold its annual meeting in Indianapolis, despite Indiana’s efforts to pass anti-gay legislation. The narrator’s fury at the CCCC’s decision to go forward with the Indianapolis meeting in spite of these concerns leads them to wonder if “perhaps queer is invariably, always already . . . incompatible with all institutions?” (162). Chapter eleven, “(Anti)Climax,” extends the narrator’s concerns about marginalized humans to the plight of animals. The chapter ends with a provocative question: what if the suicides of LGBTQIA+ youth are caused not by “a fear of not fitting in, but the fear of being forced to fit in?” (173). Perhaps because of the capaciousness of its optic, this chapter lacks the rhetorical energy of the chapters that precede it—but then, as the title of the chapter suggests, and a body of work in queer theory argues, there is something quintessentially queer about failed or anticlimactic conclusions, conclusions that refuse to conform to normative expectations of completion. The book ends with a suitably anti-normative epilogue, a multiple-choice quiz whose rigid standards and wide range of possible answers throw into relief the absurdity of standardized testing regimes.

Dreads and Open Mouths has many rhetorical strengths, but it functions most powerfully as a work of queer rage, one that bears witness to the indignities experienced by a queer immigrant of color laboring within the neoliberal North American academy while contending with multiple forms of marginalization. Yet the polemical qualities that make the book such a vital and urgent read—its queer embrace of transgression, violation, disruption, and incompleteness—prevent it from offering more detailed pedagogical suggestions.

Rallin’s pedagogical claims are couched in general terms, but they remain vitally important. *Dreads and Open Mouths* calls attention to rhetoric and composition’s overinvestment in neoliberal values, its Whiteness, its traditional privileging of American standard English and concomitant lack of openness to vernacular forms of English and alternative literacies. Rallin contends, albeit implicitly at times, that it is a mistake to suppose that cultural analysis can ever be separated from writing instruction, and that all composition instruction ought to seek to upend the dominant discourses that secure White, neoliberal power. This is a compelling claim, one that every instructor of composition needs to take seriously, and Rallin’s depictions of their own use of cultural studies by queer theorists, many of whom are also theorists of color, point to how instructors might make readings in composition courses more representative of different experiences and abilities. Yet the complaints Rallin received as a writing teacher and administrator suggest that there are limits to how much cultural critique can be incorporated into composition instruction, especially first-year writing instruction.

Rallin’s most specific pedagogical claim is that teachers must encourage their students to indulge in rhetorical risk-taking. The claim appears as part of their teaching “manifesto” and reappears throughout the text: “He wants to teach in a way that will let his students take risks. He wants to encourage them to take risks. Risk excites him and he wants to dispel the myth often invoked into

enforcing conformity—only those with privilege can afford to take risks in/with writing” (55-56). Marginalized students, Rallin contends, are often not given the opportunity to experiment in their writing, and their intellectual explorations are frequently ignored, or worse, contested, by instructors.

Rallin is right to suggest that queer students, immigrant students, students of color, and *all* marginalized students ought to be encouraged to experiment formally and intellectually. Yet their argument on behalf of risk-taking fails to attend to the ways marginalized students can be endangered by instructors who take cavalier attitudes toward pain and trauma. I hasten to add that this not the sort of attitude Rallin evinces. Still, an example they cite approvingly points to the hazards of trauma *un*-informed pedagogy. “In class, the teacher asks all the students to list the one thing they are most afraid of. The list includes death, the loss of parents, fear of drowning, fear of being killed in car accidents, in plane crashes. He offers language” (58). As Janice Carello and Lisa D. Butler note, writing prompts that casually ask students to engage with painful episodes can be retraumatizing. In one study cited by the authors, “14% of his 105 students who self-disclosed personal traumatic experiences reported ‘feeling anxious, panicky, depressed, or suicidal—feelings serious enough to warrant clinical attention’” (158). Formal and critical experimentation in composition can and should be encouraged for all students, but it needs to be done so safely, through a trauma-informed pedagogy, the way that Rallin surely incorporates it into their instruction.

Ultimately, Rallin’s hybrid project is not a pedagogy manual, and it is unfair to suggest that it should be. Rallin’s work reminds us of the importance of queer and decolonial pedagogies and epistemologies at a moment when the North American, and especially the American, status quo has never seemed more intolerable. Rhetoric and composition needs more voices like Rallin’s—voices that are willing to challenge authority, to transgress and disrupt, to demand that the field do more to meet the needs of marginalized students and instructors. Readers should heed Rallin’s critiques, while attending to the work of scholars of rhetoric and composition like Adam Banks and Asao B. Inoue, whose work Rallin cites, for more information on how to balance the priorities of composition instruction and assessment and discursive critique.

WORKS CITED

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